

# Luxury Vases

David Gill

Go to any museum containing Greek antiquities and you will find yourself surrounded by earthenware pots. This may not strike you as strange, but if you think about it, it is in fact highly paradoxical. There were individual Greeks who had enormous wealth, yet in our museums we rarely find luxury objects – of, for example, gold, silver or ivory – of the sort that are normally associated with the high standards of living of the rich. Is it the case that the Greeks did in fact live by a ceramic standard, not by a gold or silver one?

The answer to that is 'no'. The Greeks certainly had luxury items, but they normally do not survive. The reasons are that gold and silver, unlike pottery which is virtually indestructible, can be readily melted down and reworked and usually were. Again gold and silver vessels, unlike clay pots, were rarely buried with the dead but were kept above ground to benefit the living. How can we say anything about these luxury items?

## Buried treasure

Gold and silver vessels rarely survive in mainland Greece but are found in the wealthy barbarian regions where the metals were common. They appear in rich burials where the funeral customs differed from those of the Greek world and luxury vessels were thought to be appropriate objects to accompany the dead. Hoards are rare but include the dedication of twelve silver-gilt bowls in the sanctuary of Athena at Idalion on Cyprus, and the recently discovered Rogozen Treasure from Thrace which consists of 165 vessels and weighs nearly 20 kg.

At Duvanli in Thrace several silver vessels of Greek origin were found. A silver stemmed *kantharos* (drinking-cup) is decorated with satyrs and maenads in a technique known as 'gold-figure' – an 'up-market' version of the red-figure technique found on clay pots. The same technique is found on a silver *phiale* (shallow bowl for drinking or pouring libations) which shows a chariot race. Both items were made to an Attic standard: the *kantharos* weighs 250 drachmae and the *phiale* 100 drachmae.

The Seven Brothers' Tumuli in the Kuban (on the northern shores of the Black Sea) have been a major source of Greek silver vessels. Several gold-figure cups have been found – showing a seated Nike (winged victory), Bellerophon and the Chimaera, satyrs and maenads, and warriors – as well as drinking horns and perfumed-oil containers. All seem to be of Greek manufacture. During the excavation of a similar tomb at Kul Oba in the Crimea, the local villagers apparently carried off approximately 50kg of gold during the night.

It is likely that most of the gold and silver vessels disappeared into the melting-pot. However some survived the rigours of war. A silver *phiale* from around the time of the Persian Wars was found in a tomb of the Hellenistic period at Kozani in Macedonia. An inscription shows that it had originally been dedicated to Athena at Megara on the isthmus of Corinth. Presumably the sanctuary had been sacked and the *phiale* had formed part of the booty. The so-called Treasure of Curium from Cyprus likewise escaped the melting-pot by burial. Several pieces carry names of kings from the nearby town of Paphos as well as the names of their later owners in Curium. This hoard may be a result of the revolt of Cyprus against Persian rule in 498 B.C. Curium went over to Persia and was probably rewarded from the spoils of the defeated cities which included Paphos.

### **Lavish dinner parties**

Silver and gold vessels frequently appear in our written sources, in sharp contrast to the lack of references to pots. The fifth-century poet Pindar was rewarded by Athens with a gift of 10,000 drachmae (43.1 kg of silver); in one of his Olympian odes he spoke of a golden *phiale* as the peak of all possessions. This was during the period of prosperity after the Persian Wars. There can be little doubt, as many of our sources confirm, that the base for this wealth was Persian booty. At Plataea the Tent of Xerxes made a great impact on the Greeks: in Herodotus' description it had 'a display of gold and silver and brightly-coloured tapestry, ... gold and silver couches all beautifully draped, and gold and silver tables'. On the march, Antipater provided a meal for Xerxes on behalf of the Thasians. 400 talents were spent, which included 'the manufacture of drinking cups and wine-mixing bowls of gold and silver, and of everything that is needed to adorn the table'; the cups and table-gear were seized in the morning.

More than 5000 talents of silver (130 tons) may have been acquired in this way on the march from the Hellespont to the Thermaic Gulf; no wonder 'the Greeks who received Xerxes' army and entertained the king himself were brought to the depth of misery'. Thucydides says that some of this booty was still present at Athens at the start of the Peloponnesian War and regarded as part of the resources; recent studies of temple inventories have identified pieces of gold and silver plate which seem to have been made to a Persian weight standard.

At Athens luxury vessels were common in certain circles. Silver was in plentiful supply from the mines at Laurium in Attica. During the mid-fifth century the mines may have produced about 20 tons of silver (worth 736 talents) and 8000 of lead (worth 184 talents) annually; even when the costs for fuel and slaves are taken into account this still represents over 300 talents profit per year. During the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, Lysias' house was searched and three talents of silver, 400 Cyzicene staters, 100 Darics and four silver *phialai* were found.

But perhaps one of the best reminders of Athens' wealth is the departure of the Athenian fleet in 415 B.C. Thucydides says the libations were poured on every deck from gold and silver cups and, according to the historian Diodorus, the whole circumference of the Piraeus was filled with incense burners and silver wine-mixing bowls.

### Table of weight standards

#### *Attic-Euboic standard*

obol	0.72 g
drachma (6 obols)	4.31 g
mina (100 drachmae)	431.00 g
talent (60 minae)	25.86 kg

#### *Persian standard*

silver: siglos, early	c. 5.35 g
siglos, late	c. 5.55 g
gold: daric	8.25-8.46 g

In 401 B.C. 20 drachmae = 1 daric.

### Gifts to the gods

Most of the references on inscriptions to gold and silver vessels record objects stored in temples and sanctuaries. On the Athenian Acropolis lists were compiled for the three main rooms of what we call the Parthenon. The *phiale* was a common item and this seems to be because it was made to a specific weight. For instance eight *phialai* which appear in the list for 428/7 weighed 800 drachmae; seven similar *phialai* of 100drachmae each were added to the list in 429/8 and two in 428/7. The fourth-century lists include silver *hydriae* (water jars) each weighing about 10 mnae (or about 4.5 kg). Similar water jars appear in the Parthenon frieze. In 427/6 various items of booty from Mytilene were added to the Parthenon lists. These included three 'Lesbian *kotyloi*' (probably some form of drinking cup) weighing 370 drachmae. They seem to have been made to a Persian standard as this may be read as 300 sigloi (at 5.32 g).

### Luxury vases and pottery surrogates

Although most of the plate that was in use in the Greek world has disappeared, the shapes and styles are reflected in contemporary pottery. Such a phenomenon has also been recognised in such diverse cultures (and periods of time) as those of China, Islam and Rome.

Even the colours of ancient pottery may reflect metalwork. A newly published papyrus text suggests that in parts at least of the Greek world silver was kept black, in an oxidised condition, and this gives us a fresh perspective on the black, metallic glaze of Athenian and other pottery. Other colours are red for gold, purple for copper, and white for ivory. We should remember the low value of pottery compared to silver and gold. Using commercial graffiti on pots and the bullion value of extant plate, we find that the ratio of values between clay and silver vessels may have been as high as 1:1000; during the Archidamian War, gold was worth fourteen times the value of silver. With such information we need to move away from a view of the Greek world living on a ceramic standard, and instead recognise the important role of silver and gold in society.

*David Gill is a Sir James Knott Fellow in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne working on the use of gold and silver plate in antiquity. He is currently engaged in the Methana field survey in the Peloponnese.*